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Tom Long: The Reel Deal

Michigan movies are taking baby steps



Hollywood will not be saving the state of Michigan anytime soon. But it may offer a little help.

This was made clear in a recent report from the Center for Economic Analysis at Michigan State University on the burgeoning Michigan film industry. The report estimates the film industry in Michigan, while an economic plus, will still generate less than \$200 million annually by 2012.

"That is really kind of a small part of the Michigan economy, and it always will be," says Steven R. Miller, one of the report's authors and the center's director.

In comparison, according to Miller, the rarely mentioned museum industry in Michigan generates \$212 million a year. Something called agricultural and forestry services make up \$227 million annually.

And then there are this state's true big industries. Agriculture generates \$61 billion annually, according to Miller. Transportation equipment -- cars, trucks and all that -- makes up a whopping \$145 billion.

This sort of perspective is probably valuable as we approach the April 7 anniversary of Michigan's film incentives law, which returns to filmmakers up to 40 percent of the money they spend in this state.

Over the past year, the hype and argument about the industry has been nearly constant, likely reflecting both the state's economic desperation and need for something to hang some hope on.

In reality the film industry here, even if it continues to grow like crazy, is comparatively small potatoes.

But consider this: It's still potatoes.

And with all the current economic woes in Michigan, any potatoes are good potatoes. The film industry is growing and it has given some people jobs and put actual potatoes on dinner plates.

Beyond that, the film industry is sexy potatoes. They look good.

Film is the sort of industry that -- even though the report projects it will be generating fewer than 3,000 jobs statewide by 2012 -- might convince young people that this state is still a hip place to live, thus stemming the current epidemic migration of young, educated people to other states.

Right now the industry is taking baby steps in Michigan. Few of the 32 films or TV productions shot in Michigan last year will actually make it to a screen.

Aside from TV movies, the only film shot here in 2008 to make it to theaters so far has been "Gran Torino," although both "Youth in Revolt" and "Whip It!" seem likely to surface eventually.

Most of the work done here has been low-budget stuff. The average Hollywood mainstream film these days costs \$100 million to make. The entire budget spent on 32 films here last year was only \$65.4 million, according to the report.

But these low-budget films have served as a training ground for a nascent workforce.

So what if "Butterfly Effect: Revelation" never made it to your Cineplex and is now on DVD? The local people working on it developed skills they can take to bigger productions.

Hollywood may not be coming to save Michigan. But it may be a small part of the state's eventual turnaround.

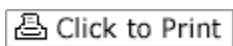
"What impresses me about the (film) incentive is the opportunity for Michigan to further diversify itself," says Miller. "This is just one of the tools the state has put together to help make that transition possible."

And hey, if along the way we get to see some movie stars... well, that's sexy potatoes, right?

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